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# AMERICANS OF JEWISH DESCENT

By

MALCOLM H. STERN

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## AMERICANS OF JEWISH DESCENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR TRACING THEIR GENEALOGY

By MALCOLM H. STERN\*

Genealogy has played a unique role in Jewish life. At the very beginning of our recorded history in the Bible, one finds a mass of genealogical data.<sup>1</sup> The genealogies of Genesis, Chapters 4, 5, 10, and 11, contain intriguing folk-explanations of origins. And when the Bible fails to ascribe an origin, later Jewish commentators have frequently supplied an ascription. At least two of these Bible-based ascriptions are pertinent to this paper, as we shall demonstrate presently. But first, let us pursue a bit more about Biblical genealogy.

Of greater historical importance than the Genesis "begats", are the records of the Kings of Israel and Judah scattered throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles. In most instances, each king is mentioned with both parents' names. Therefore, it is a simple matter to trace the various dynasties that ruled over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as the dynasty of David that ruled over the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Jeremiah, in chapters 23 and 33, makes two allusions to a restored kingdom, ruled over by "a sprout of David".<sup>2</sup> These passages gave rise to the concept of Messianic descent from David that was to affect both Christian and Jewish thinking. The Evangelists used it in the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3 as evidence of Jesus' Messiah-hood. Several centuries later, when the center of Jewish life had moved from Palestine to Babylonia, the autonomous Jewish community vested its authority in an Exilarch, for whom the claim of Davidic ancestry was made. This hereditary office lasted from the 2d until the 13th Century, when the Turks uprooted the Babylonian Jewish community, sending many of its members westward to Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, where other Jews had long been settled.

Two other genealogical claims of Biblical origin have left their mark on Jewish life. Those of you who are familiar with the Book of Leviticus know that the role of priest in the wilderness tabernacle was assigned to Aaron, Moses' brother, of the tribe of Levi. The tradition arose that when the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the priesthood fell to the descendants of Aaron, who were given the title in Hebrew "Cohen", meaning "priest". The remainder of the tribe of Levi's descendants were assigned the subordinate roles of the Sanctuary: choristers, janitors, etc. In the year 70 of the Common Era, the Romans destroyed the Temple and these functions became obsolete, but the descendants of the functionaries maintained the custom of adding Cohen or Levy to their given names. This accounts for the frequency of these two surnames among Jews.

In the nineteen hundred years since the destruction of the Temple, the Jews have been uprooted so often that it is impossible to authenticate the present-day descent of many who bear these names, but the fact that certain roles in the synagogue ritual were assigned to them throughout the ages may lend credence to those whose family claim such descent.<sup>3</sup>

Few Jewish families have preserved their genealogies in written form. The Jewish love of scholarship led occasional descendants of outstanding rabbis to record their descent. The oldest of such families whom we can trace to the present day is the de Sola<sup>4</sup> family, whose earliest known ancestor lived in 9th century Navarre, in Northern Spain. But the genealogy has some major gaps in it.

The majority of Jews had little opportunity to record family history. As a persecuted minority, they were much too involved with the basic problems of achieving a livelihood and minimal security.

\* Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern, who holds the degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters, is pastor of Ohel Sholom Temple, Norfolk, Va., official genealogist of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, O., and a member of the National Genealogical Society.





Thus, a dearth of written family records is the first factor to confront the researcher in Jewish genealogy.

An even more important factor is the history of the Jews, especially the Jews of Europe; for like most Americans, American Jews are largely of European descent. Here is where those two Biblical ascriptions, mentioned above, come in. In Chapter 10 of *Genesis*, we learn that Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. While early Christian commentators made these three the ancestors of the white, black, and yellow races, respectively Jewish commentators did not. Japheth's eldest son was Gomer, and Gomer's first-born was named Ashkenaz. Somehow, in mediaeval Jewish lore, the name Ashkenaz came to be applied to Germany; and from the 12th Century on, the Jews of Germany and their descendants came to be known as Ashkenazim. An even older tradition takes the allusion in *Obadiah*, verse 20, "the captivity of Jerusalem that is in Sepharad", to refer to Spain. So in later centuries, the Jews who settled in the Iberian Peninsula and their descendants became known as Sephardim.<sup>5</sup> These designations "Ashkenazim" and "Sephardim" are important for an understanding of American Jewish history. The two groups differ not only in geographical origin, but also in language, in religious rites, in social customs, and in style of names.

During the Middle Ages, the Spanish-Portuguese, or Sephardic, Jewish community was far larger and far more important than the Ashkenazic. Indeed, in the various Christian and Moslem kingdoms that existed on the Spanish peninsula, the Jews reached such peaks of prosperity and cultural development that this is known as the "Golden Age of Jewish History". As you may recall, Spain became a united kingdom, first by the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Leon with Ferdinand of Aragon, and then by these monarchs' successful defeat of the last of the Moslem rulers of Grenada. In an effort to further unify their domain, these zealously-Catholic monarchs issued an

edict in 1492, requiring all their subjects to accept their faith or go into exile. Many of the Jews chose exile.

One interested observer of the effect of this decree on the Jews was Christopher Columbus. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to indicate that he was not a Genoese by birth, but rather a Spaniard of Jewish origin, belonging to a known Jewish family named Colón—the Spanish version of his name.<sup>6</sup>

A century earlier, in 1391, under Church influence, there had been a forced mass conversion of the Jews of Spain. Many of these New Christians, as they were called, continued to practice their Judaism in secret. Some of these achieved positions of economic and social importance, became courtiers, and were granted patents of nobility. In so doing, they aroused the jealousy of so-called Old Christians, and these prevailed upon Ferdinand and Isabella to institute the Inquisition, whose ostensible purpose was to search out defections from the faith, by fair means or foul. Many New Christians perished at the stake for no greater offense than changing their linen on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

When the edict of 1492 was enacted, many Jews fled to Portugal, where they were welcomed for their business enterprise by King Manuel. But five years later, under pressure from the Spanish monarchs, Manuel introduced the Inquisition that was to last in Portugal until the 19th century. At the same time, the King forbade the Jews to leave Portugal, giving conversion or death as their only alternatives.

In the meantime, other exiles from Spain were finding new homes in the Italian provinces, in North Africa, and in the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean, all places where their descendants may still be found practicing Judaism according to the rites and customs of pre-1492 Spain. A small number of Jews from these areas may now be found in America.

Of greater importance to us are the Spanish-Portuguese New Christians, who





throughout the 16th and 17th centuries escaped in ever greater numbers to France, England, and Holland—all lands where Jews were prohibited from living. In 1575, the Dutch, under William of Orange, secured their independence from Spain and established the Netherlands as a Protestant land. Under the liberal rule of the House of Orange, the Sephardic New Christians openly re-embraced Judaism, forming, at first, three synagogues in Amsterdam. These were later united into one large congregation, whose rites and by-laws became the model for all but one of the synagogues established in the American colonies during the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Jews had been expelled from England by King Edward I in 1290. In 1655, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam persuaded Oliver Cromwell that the longed-for age of the Messiah could come only when the Jews had spread abroad to *every* land. This argument swayed the devout, Bible-reading Puritan, and the Jews were readmitted. Some few individual Jews had been living in England from the time of Henry VII, but the majority of whom we have any record were temporary residents, or New Christians of Portuguese origin. Those who were in residence at the time of Cromwell's pronouncement came out of hiding and embraced Judaism openly.

In the meantime, New Christians were following the Spaniards and Portuguese to Latin America. There, in the New World, some tried to return to Judaism, only to have the Inquisition follow them and thwart their efforts. With the expanding Dutch colonization in the New World, Jews settled in the Dutch provinces of Brazil. From about 1630 a thriving congregation was established at Recife, and shortly thereafter, another was formed on the adjacent island of Mauricia. But they were to be short-lived.<sup>7</sup> In 1649, the Portuguese, coming up the coast from Rio de Janeiro, besieged Recife, and after a five years' struggle, the Dutch capitulated. Under an amnesty granted by the Portuguese commander, many of the Dutch, including the majority

of the Jews, returned to Amsterdam. Others took refuge to the North, on the coast of Guiana and in the West Indies. One boat-load, containing, among others, 26 Jews, found its way, after many trials, to New Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup> There they landed on September 6 or 7, 1654, to found the first Jewish settlement in North America.<sup>9</sup>

Let us revert for a moment to the Ashkenazim, and examine briefly the history of German Jewry. Jewish traders and Jewish slaves seem to have followed the Roman legions to the Rhine, and we have records of Jewish settlements in that area dating back to the 3rd Century. The feudal period, which tied the serfs to the land and the nobility to the administration of their lands, saw the Jew in the role of international trader. Kings and nobles came to rely on their Jewish subjects for banking, money-lending, coining, and jewelry-making, trades to which the Jews were subsequently restricted by law.

When the Crusades broke out with all their fervor, the majority of the populace of Central Europe, unable to follow the armies to the Holy Land, turned on the Jews as the infidels nearest at hand. For self-protection, the Jews in the various communities moved into areas that were adjacent to the homes of their fellow-Jews. Subsequently, they were restricted by law to these areas; walls were built around them, and the ghetto was born. In these segregated communities Jewish life and customs became fairly well fixed, and though the Jews were often driven from one community to another, their patterns of living remained comparatively unchanged for centuries. Moving eastward into Poland and Russia, they formed large communities in what was, until 1917, the Russian Empire. Hitler destroyed six million of their descendants. The few survivors have found refuge in the New World or in Israel. Those who still remain behind the Iron Curtain are subject to restriction and persecution.

But I am ahead of my story. The opening of Holland, England, and America led some of the Ashkenazim to leave the lands of persecution and follow the Sephardim. Lacking, at first, the social and cultural



advantages that the Spanish-Portuguese had known, the Ashkenazim were looked down upon by the Sephardim. Indeed, during the 18th Century, especially in class-conscious England, a marriage between a Sephardic Jew and an Ashkenazic one was deemed by the former a *mésalliance*.

In the freer atmosphere of America, these social distinctions were less evident. While North America was first settled by the Sephardic Jews, and, as we have indicated, the vast majority of the earliest congregations followed Sephardic rite, by 1750 the Ashkenazim out-numbered the Sephardim. The Sephardic group remained strongest in the West Indies, which, in the 17th and 18th centuries were economically far more important than the mainland. Along with the millions of other immigrants who have made America populous and great, came more and more Jews. The trickle of Jewish immigrants reached one peak in the period following the failure of the republican revolutions of 1848 in Central Europe, when a mass of Jews from Germany poured into this country. Impoverished, and ignorant of English, this mass migration moved out of the port cities of the East Coast into the newly-opening Midwest and the hinterland of the South. Many started their American careers as itinerant peddlars, becoming eventually the merchants of many an American city.

In 1868, Czar Alexander II freed Russia's serfs to an era of poverty and misery that led to pogroms against the defenseless Jewish communities of the Russian Empire. As a consequence, the period from 1870 to World War I witnessed the largest Jewish immigration from Europe, totalling more than three million people. The rise of Nazism and the opening of the concentration camps after World War II produced a second wave of Jewish immigrants. Thus, today's American Jewry is predominantly Ashkenazic. The descendants of the early Sephardim have all but disappeared. Intermarried with the Ashkenazim or with Christians, they became rapidly assimilated. The Sephardim in America today are recent immigrants from the West Indies or from the old communities of Turkey and North Africa, mentioned before. Indeed, the two early

congregations that still carry on the Sephardic ritual, one in New York and the other in Philadelphia, have memberships that are almost completely Ashkenazic.

I have stressed these two streams of history because they do have bearing on the genealogist's work. The chief factor in determining which individuals are of Sephardic background and which of Ashkenazic is the family name. Throughout the Middle Ages, most Jews were identified by a simple Hebrew patronymic; e.g., Moses ben (meaning 'son of') Maimon. In those portions of Spain that were under Arab domination, some Jews acquired Moslem-type names by which they were known in the business community, while retaining their Hebrew name for such synagogue records as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death. This dual naming custom passed into Christian-dominated Spain where it became quite common for assimilative Jews to bear a so-called 'Christian' name, as well as their Jewish one. Among the Spanish aristocracy of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, it became customary to adopt as part of a family name both patronymic and matronymic, and this led to triple names, a custom soon generally followed in Christian, Marrano (i.e. New Christian), and Jewish communities. Often, siblings would select differing combinations of ancestral names. Jews, upon conversion to Christianity, would often take, by choice or by force, the family name of their baptismal sponsor. To add to the confusion, when the Sephardim moved to lands of liberty and reverted to Judaism, they would often assume a Biblical surname, but add—for synagogue purposes—some Iberian-sounding name that either had reference to the family's place of origin in Spain or Portugal or had some ancestral tradition attached to it. An example of this genealogical headache is the da Costa family of 17th Century Amsterdam: Upon arrival from Portugal, Gabriel da Costa, became simply, Uriel da Costa. His brother, known publicly as Miguel Esteves de Pina, became in the synagogue, Mordecai da Costa. A third brother bore the name Joao Perez de Cunha, becoming Joseph da Costa.

The majority of Sephardic Jews on the American scene are identifiable from their





names of obviously Iberian or Arabic origin. Early West Indian Jewish immigrants occasionally followed the old-country custom of using a matronymic rather than a patronymic last name. The majority, however, used the matronymic as a middle name. However, within one or two generations of immigration, the family name became fixed. The early Sephardic Jews in America used Biblical given names almost exclusively. They indicated paternity by the use of a particle "de" (meaning 'son of'). Often, one family would have several individuals bearing the same set of father-son Biblical names, so the grandfather's name would be added. This was especially true in the closely-knit Jewish communities of the West Indies where the opportunity for similarly-named individuals to move away was smaller than in the expanding United States. Thus we come across a name like Samuel de Abraham de Jacob Judah Leon. To the genealogist this is to be interpreted as: Samuel, son of Abraham, grandson of Jacob, of the family Judah Leon, whose family name indicates that in a more remote generation a female Judah married a male Leon.

Female offspring are similarly indicated among the Sephardim. Thus the above-mentioned Samuel's sister would be listed as Sarah de Abraham de Jacob Judah Leon.

Another custom among the Sephardim that is a boon to the genealogist is one whereby the oldest son was usually named for his paternal grandfather, the second son for the maternal grandfather, the eldest daughter for the paternal grandmother, and the second daughter for the maternal grandmother. Among the Ashkenazim this custom applied only when the grandparent was dead, and there was less feeling of requirement to follow the protocol. Indeed, the majority of Ashkenazim to the present day almost superstitiously avoid naming after a living relative. But the assimilative tendency is strong among Jews; and those families which have resided in America for several generations have their Juniors and III's.

Until the first decade of the 19th Century, the majority of Ashkenazic Jews were without family names. They were known merely by the Hebrew patronymic of synagogue usage. To avoid confusion

between individuals of the same name, the place of birth, occupation, or a nickname was occasionally added as an identifying feature. Thus, the hump-backed grandfather of composer Felix Mendelssohn, applying as a Jew from Dessau for admission to the city of Berlin, called himself Moses ben Mendel, of Dessau. As an assimilated Jew of Berlin, and the outstanding philosopher of his generation, he became known as Moses Mendelssohn; although he might just as easily have become Moses Dessauer, or even Moses Hunchback. This was the process that operated among the Ashkenazim when, under Emperor Joseph II of the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleon, and Czar Alexander I, the Jews were required to take last names in their respective domains.

Usually, the Ashkenazim chose some simple form of patronymic, like Abrahams, Isaacson, Jacobi, etc. Jews from Eastern Europe used Slavic-type patronymic suffixes: -ovitch and -owsky, or -witz. Vocational and place names were the second choice. An interesting variant of the patronymic was the use of animal names, especially those animals referred to in *Genesis* 49 where Jacob blesses each of his sons, comparing a number of them to animals: Judah is like the lion; Benjamin, like the wolf; Naphtali, like the hart, etc. Thus a 19th Century son of a man named Judah would adopt Löw or Loeb (German for 'lion') as his family name; while a Benjamin's son would chose Wolf as his family name.

In some areas, cruel government officials assigned the family names to the Jews, exacting bribes for more attractive-sounding names, and bestowing ridiculous-sounding ones on the penniless.<sup>10</sup>

In England, some Sephardim and many Ashkenazim anglicized their names, often, to such an extent, that it is impossible to determine the origin of the name. The practice of name-changing among American Jews has persisted to the present day.

One other custom, more important historically than genealogically, is the language difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. The Sephardim who left Spain in 1492 carried with them the Spanish language, which they wrote with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Corrupted a bit by the language of the lands





to which they migrated, Italian, Greek, Turkish, and Arabic, this jargon became known as Ladino. Among the Ashkenazim a similar process took place. The Jews, dealing in international trade, required some code-language to keep business secrets from prying eyes. The result was a form of German, written in the characters of the Hebrew alphabet, known as Juedisch-Deutsch, or Yiddish. Among Eastern European Jews words of Polish, Russian, and even Hebrew derivation crept in, and a whole literature in Yiddish developed. The gradual emancipation of German Jewry from segregation in the early 19th century, and the Russian Revolution of the 20th, brought an abandonment of Yiddish that threatens this jargon with extinction.

With this background of history and custom, we are now ready to present some of the specific sources for tracing Americans of Jewish descent. My own researches have concentrated primarily on those Jews who were settled in America by 1840, and, I believe, most genealogists are interested in the early period.

The published volumes of Jewish genealogy for this period can literally be counted on the fingers of one hand.<sup>11</sup> All of these are small, privately printed, family records. They are:

1) Henry Aaron Alexander's *Notes on the Alexander Family of South Carolina and Georgia and Connections*. Published in 1954, this useful volume traces many of the descendants of Abraham Alexander, Sr., of Charleston, S. C.; Abraham Isaacks, of New York; Sampson Mears, of London; Asher Michael de Paul, of New York; and Lizar Joseph, of Georgetown, S. C.

2) Evelina Gleaves Cohen's *Family Facts and Fairy Tales*, published in 1953, deals with Bowyers, Heaps, Gleaves, and her husband's Cohen family. The latter, one of several 19th century Cohen families of Philadelphia, is the only one in the book that is of Jewish origin.

3) Caroline Cohen's pioneer work, published in Washington in 1913, under the title, *Records of the Myers, Hays, and Mordecai Families from 1707 to*

1913. The Myers family originated in New York, but important branches moved to Virginia. The Hays family also originated in New York, one branch migrating to Virginia, and another to Indiana; while still other branches can be found in Canada. The Mordecais originated in Philadelphia, but migrated to Virginia and North Carolina.

4) Sanford A. Moss' pamphlet, published in 1937, *Genealogy of John Moss and his wife Rebecca (Lyons) Moss*. John Moss migrated from England to Philadelphia early in the 19th century. His wife came from a family of Dutch extraction that came to Pennsylvania during the Revolution. Among their more important lines are the Moss, Phillips, and Samuel families that centered in Philadelphia in the 19th century.

Two families of later arrivals in America have published their genealogies:

Charles M. Rice's *Genealogy of the Stix Family*, published in 1921, is the record of a Cincinnati and St. Louis family that immigrated about 1840.

Chester J. Teller's *The Teller Family in America* deals with a Philadelphia family that arrived about 1848.

We are not, however, without printed source material of value to the genealogist. Topping the list come the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*. The Society, organized in 1892, has, to date, issued 46 volumes of *Publications*. Volumes 1 to 37 were annuals, of which volumes 4, 6, 7, 34, and 36, are, regrettably, out-of-print. Volume 38 and following have been issued in quarterly form. These valuable *Publications* contain genealogies, family histories, biographies, vital records, and other assorted items of interest to the genealogist. The first 20 volumes have been indexed in a separate volume. Lack of funds has prevented the publication of a collated index for the subsequent volumes, but each volume contains its own index.

Of some assistance, also, are the two encyclopedias referred to in the footnotes: *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, published in 12 volumes in 1906 by Funk & Wagnalls; and *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*,



published in 10 volumes, 1939-1943. Both contain many articles of biography, family history, and community history. The former includes a large number of genealogical tables; the latter concentrates heavily on American Jewish history, family history, and biography.

There are many works of history, biography, memoirs, and miscellanies, but their value to the genealogist is minimal. Rather than merely listing bibliography, I prefer to take you on a guided tour of the more important sources of information, indicating those books, background data and individuals that can prove most helpful to the researcher.

New England, the area that offers probably the best source material for the general genealogist is the area that is least fruitful for the seeker of Jewish records. Except for Newport, Rhode Island, no organized Jewish community existed in New England before the 1840's.<sup>12</sup> Puritan Massachusetts tolerated only a few occasional Jewish merchants in the metropolis of Boston, and prior to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century, most of the other New England towns were too small to attract more than one or two Jews at a time. Most of these inter-married and were rapidly lost to Judaism.

In contrast, Newport became a lively center of Jewish life and commerce, possibly as early as 1658. Attracted by the liberal policies proclaimed in the charter of Rhode Island by Roger Williams, a group of Jews from Barbados arrived between 1677 and 1680. In the earlier year, the cemetery, still extant, was purchased. Although many of the earliest graves must have disappeared, a number of the epitaphs were copied in 1872, and these were published in *The Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, v. 27, p. 191f. They appear, also, with many other details in Rabbi Morris A. Gutstein's *The Story of the Jews of Newport* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1936).

The beautiful Touro Synagogue, opened in 1763, is the oldest synagogue building in the United States, and was recently declared a National Historic site. The congregation that erected this handsome structure soon found itself faced with de-

pression and disintegration. The Revolution found the Jewish community divided between Patriots and Tories. British occupation of the town brought ruin to the first group; American victory ruined the second. Many of the Jews departed. The synagogue was maintained by the few survivors until 1822, when the last Jew moved to New York. Only the benefactions of the Touro brothers, Abraham and Judah, saved the synagogue and the cemetery from destruction. The synagogue remained closed, except for occasional summer services, until newcomers to the town revived the congregation in 1883.

If any vital records were kept in the synagogue, they have disappeared. We are fortunate, however, to have the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society, with headquarters in Providence. Organized in 1951 by David C. Adelman, who continues as President and Editor, this Society has brought forth five quarterly issues of beautifully illustrated *Historical Notes*. Queries on Rhode Island Jewry are welcomed at 52 Power Street, Providence.

New York, as we have already indicated, boasts the oldest permanent Jewish settlement in North America. That boatload of 26 refugees from Brazil found a chill welcome from Peter Stuyvesant. Intercession by Jewish stockholders of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam secured the right of the immigrants to remain, to worship privately, and to purchase a cemetery by 1656. Eight years later, when the British took over New Amsterdam and made it New York, only one Jewish name appears on the list of those who took the oath of allegiance required of all Dutch citizens who remained. Evidently, most of the other Jews had departed.<sup>13</sup>

By 1682, the need had arisen for a new cemetery. Whether the old one was full or had washed away in a flood tide is not known; all trace of it and of those who were interred in it has disappeared. However, we do have in print an excellent volume on the second cemetery, Rabbi David de Sola Pool's *Portraits Etched in Stone, 1682-1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952). Every occupant of this cemetery and of the congregation's two subsequent Manhattan cemeteries is





listed. Detailed biographical sketches, containing much genealogical data, are included.

This oldest congregation in North America is still functioning as the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue Shearith Israel (The Remnant of Israel). Its present synagogue, located at 99 Central Park West, contains an archive of minutes and vital records that is invaluable to the researcher.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Victor Tarry serves as Archivist.

The headquarters of the American Jewish Historical Society, mentioned above, is also in New York. It is located at 122nd Street and Broadway, in the building of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In its 65-year history, the Society has collected many valuable manuscripts, portraits, and other personalia, including family histories and genealogies. Unfortunately, a lack of space, staff, and funds has prevented the Society from having its material readily available. The Librarian of the Society, Rabbi Isidore Meyer, is, however, eager to assist researchers.

Unfortunately, there is no history of this largest Jewish community in the world, New York, that contains any vital records or data useful to the genealogist. And the Ashkenazim did not maintain the Sephardic tradition of preserving such records in the synagogue. Therefore, most genealogical research in New York Jewish lineage requires the use of public records.

For Philadelphia Jewry we can report better source material. There is Sephardic Congregation Mikveh Israel, founded in 1745. It has an archive with vital records going back to 1775, but there is no archivist; so these records can be consulted only by appointment, unless one goes to Cincinnati to examine the photostatic copies on file at the American Jewish Archives.

Philadelphia does have a number of excellent Jewish historians, past and present, from whom have come no less than three histories of the Jewish community. The first, a pioneer volume of American Jewish historiography, is entitled *The Jews in Philadelphia prior to 1800*. Produced in 1883 by Hyman P. Rosenbach, an elder brother of the late bibliophile, A.S.W. Rosenbach, this book contains a

few references useful to the genealogist. Of greater help is Henry S. Morais' *The Jews of Philadelphia*, published in 1894. A more detailed study of the early community, but with less genealogical information, is the 1957 publication, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson*, by Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, able contemporary Jewish historians.

Also in the Philadelphia area, resides the only other worker in the field of American Jewish genealogy beside myself. She is my enthusiastic collaborator, Mrs. Robert D. Abrahams, of 8204 Cedar Road, Elkins Park. Mrs. Abrahams, an ardent amateur, delights to do research and will welcome any queries. She spends much of her time in travel, however, so prompt replies may not be forthcoming.

Baltimore, far from the sea and from trade routes, was comparatively late in attracting a Jewish community, although important Jewish families settled there in the Federal period. The *Maryland Historical Magazine* has given us the best genealogies of three of these families: Levy, Cohen, and Etting; so the Maryland Historical Society would probably be your best source of information for the area.

Mr. Louis F. Cahn, of Congregation Oheb Shalom, published an excellent congregational history in 1953, in which he included a chapter on early Baltimore Jewish history. He can be addressed, in care of the Congregation, at 1307 Eutaw Place.

Washington boasts the newest center for American Jewish history in the recently erected B'nai Brith Building at 17th Street and Rhode Island Avenue. While the B'nai Brith files contain probably little of genealogical interest, Mrs. Meyer Greenberg, who serves as Historical Research Assistant, and other members of the staff, will gladly direct researchers to helpful channels of information.

Virginia in Colonial days was far more of a plantation area than one with urban centers. Although we can trace itinerant Jewish traders as early as 1658, it was 1769 before Isaiah Isaacs became the first permanent Jewish settler in Richmond. Another twenty years passed before the Jewish community had grown sufficiently to form a congregation. We are fortunate





in having some few marriage records preserved for this congregation, Beth Shalome, and for the subsequent Ashkenazic congregation, Beth Ahabah, with which it later merged. Equally valuable for genealogical data is *The History of the Jews of Richmond, 1769-1917*, by Herbert T. Ezekiel & Gaston Lichtenstein, which contains, in addition to numerous biographies and family histories, very complete cemetery records.

A similar work on a smaller scale is the *History of the Jews of Petersburg, 1789-1950*, by Louis Ginsberg. Mr. Ginsberg is currently engaged in compiling a history of the Jews of Virginia, to which I contributed the chapters on Norfolk and Charlottesville Jewry. He and Mr. Saul Viener, a Richmond historian, are serving as co-Presidents of a recently-organized Southern Jewish Historical Society, with headquarters in Richmond's Vallentine Museum.

North Carolina's towns were also late in developing either the size or the industry to attract Jewish communities, and no congregation existed before 1873, when one was established in Wilmington. As a consequence we can report no sources in the Tarheel State.

South Carolina, on the other hand, is rich in Jewish history. The earliest settler is traceable to 1696, and Congregation Beth Elohim (House of God), still in existence, was founded in 1750. From 1790 until New York began its phenomenal growth in the 1820's, Charleston boasted the largest and most cultured Jewish community in America. All told they numbered only about 500, but this represented probably 1/5 of America's Jewish population in the first decades of the 19th Century. At the opening of the 20th Century, the Charleston Congregation had as its Rabbi, Dr. Barnett A. Elzas, a man of great industry, with an enthusiasm for historical research. To him we are indebted for a name-filled history entitled *The Jews of South Carolina* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1905). He also brought out two volumes of data: *The Old Jewish Cemeteries at Charleston, S. C. 1762-1903*, published in the latter year; and *Jewish Marriage Notices from the Newspaper Press of Charleston, S. C., 1775-1906*, issued in New York in 1917.

In addition, he printed pamphlet cemetery records for the Jewish cemeteries at Columbia, Camden, and Orangeburg, S. C., and a newer Charleston cemetery. His notebooks and files were bequeathed to the New York [State] Historical Society, and they contain much additional data, including a cemetery record for Georgetown, newspaper death notices, and further marriage notices. All of Elzas' published works are out-of-print, but they can be found in a number of leading libraries.

A more contemporary history, *The Jews of Charleston*, by Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Engelman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950) contains much information supplementing Elzas'.

Savannah Jewry is interesting because it is the only community that arrived within a month of the founding of a colony, and immediately formed a congregation. This was in 1733. Until recently, little genealogical data was available for Savannah Jewry. The congregation remained small, at times even ceasing to function. A periodical article, listing the founders of the community; a congregational minute book for 1790-1852 (with many gaps); and a WPA typescript cemetery record,<sup>15</sup> were about the only sources available. Within the past several months, descendants of the early Sheftall family have made available to the Library of the University of Georgia, at Athens, the manuscript vital record of the Jewish community of Savannah from its arrival in 1733 until the formal reorganization of the congregation in 1790. The coming and going of every Jewish immigrant is recorded, as are births, marriages, and deaths.

So much for the original centers of Jewish life in America. But many Jews moved from them into the hinterland. Frequently they married non-Jews, or—to avoid the complications of Jewish ritual requirements—lived in common-law relationships. How can we trace them? The answer is, by the usual methods of genealogical research: searching for public records, family mementos, tombstones, etc.

One recently organized center of material is the American Jewish Archives, of Cincinnati. Located on the campus of the Hebrew Union College, it has collected, in either original or photostatic form,



every available congregational and organizational record in American Jewish life before 1900. Family documents, wills, histories, diaries, scrap-books — anything that pertains to American Jewry—has been filed and catalogued. A recent project of the Archives has been the acquiring on microfilm of every American Jewish periodical published, from the first publication in 1823 until 1925.<sup>10</sup> The services of the Archives' staff are gratis to researchers, although donations are gratefully received. Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, recognized as America's leading Jewish historian, serves as Director of the Archives.

I am the genealogist for the American Jewish Archives. My compendium of American Jewish genealogy, *Americans of Jewish Descent*, a pioneer work in the field, will be published by the Archives sometime this year. It will contain the family trees of all available Jewish families established in the United States by 1840. The work has taken more than seven years to compile, and when published, will contain an index with over 25,000 entries. Additions are gratefully received, as it is our intention to publish supplements from time to time. Address communications to: American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati 20, Ohio.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopedia* V, 596f., article "Genealogy", lists 28 Old Testament genealogies.

<sup>2</sup> *Jeremiah* 23.5-6; 33.15-16.

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see "Priests", in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, X, 192f.; and "Levites", *ibid.* VIII, 49f.

<sup>4</sup> A skeletal genealogy of the de Sola family will be found in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, XI, 430.

<sup>5</sup> In Hebrew, the suffix 'im' indicates masculine plural.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. article "Columbus" in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, and the sources mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Wiznitzer, Arnold. *The Records of the Earliest Jewish Community in the New World* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1954). Identical material appears in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLII, 217-302, 387-395.

<sup>8</sup> Among those sharing these vicissitudes was Dominy Polhemius, as described by Dr. Herbert Seversmith in *NGS Quarterly* for December 1955.

<sup>9</sup> This Tercentenary anniversary was widely celebrated in 1954.

<sup>10</sup> For further details, consult the articles on "Names" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, IX, 156, and in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, v.8, p.95f.

<sup>11</sup> The first compendium of American Jewish genealogy will be my own forthcoming *Americans of Jewish Descent*.

<sup>12</sup> The indications of an organized Jewish community are a Jewish cemetery and/or a Jewish congregation.

<sup>13</sup> For details on all known New Amsterdam Jewish settlers, see my article "The Story of the First Jewish Settlers in the United States", in *American Judaism*, quarterly house organ of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 838 Fifth Avenue, New York 21. Issue for December, 1954.

<sup>14</sup> Photostatic copy may be consulted at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati.

<sup>15</sup> One copy of the *Savannah Jewish Burial Ground* is in the Library of the National Archives, Washington.

<sup>16</sup> A Catalogue of Jewish newspapers and periodicals available on microfilm can be obtained by writing to the American Jewish Periodical Center, Cincinnati 20, Ohio. This is a subordinate agency of the American Jewish Archives.



















